LODI HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Incorporated October 20, 1988

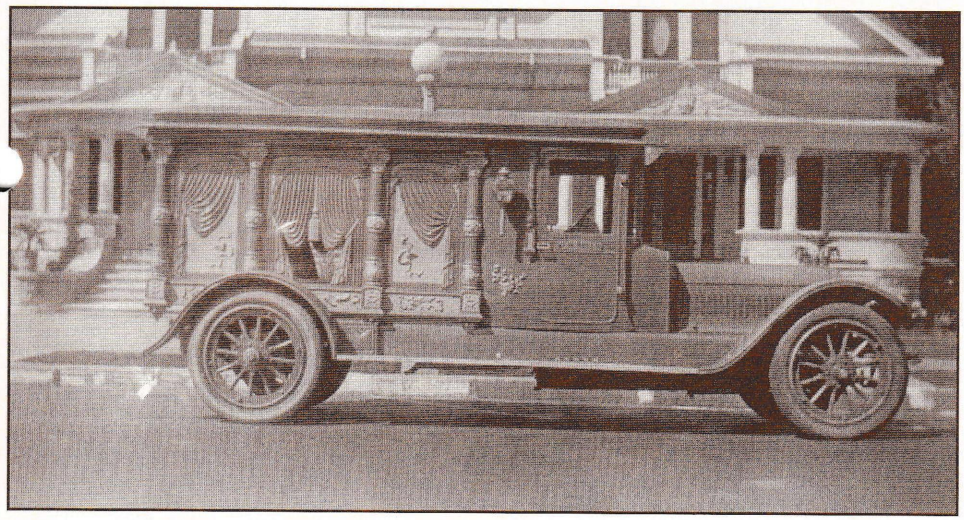
LODI HISTORIAN

VOLUME 8, NUMBER 4 WINTER 1997

EARLY LODI UNDERTAKERS

By Nancy Lee Schmer

Death was an intensely personal experience for survivors in early America. Family members cleaned the body, dug the grave, built the coffin, and sometimes even carved the gravestone. Between the death and the funeral, the body lay in the family parlor, where mourners took turns watching over it, the practical reason being the ever-present possibility that signs of life might be observed. The family also carried the coffin on foot from the home to the church for the service, then on to the graveyard.



▲ *The O.H Wells hearse and newly remodeled funeral home at 123 N. School Street, circa 1923.*
PHOTO MERRY DONAHUE

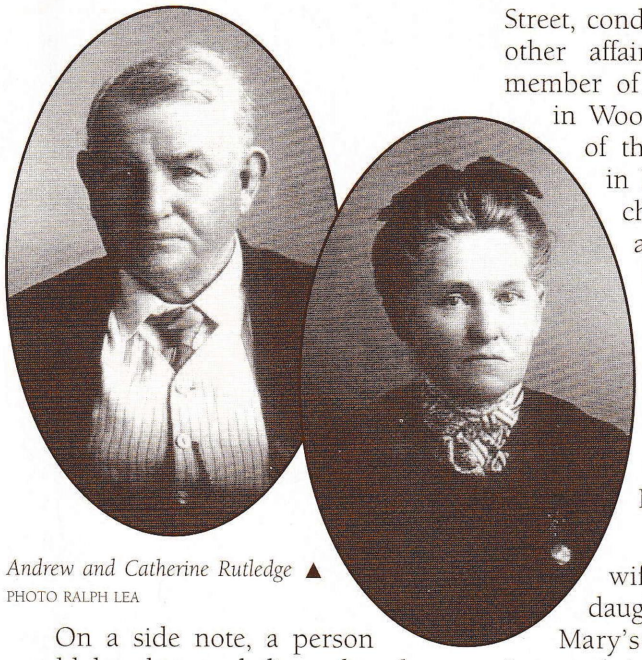
The first undertakers were drawn mainly from three occupations, all concerned with some aspect of burial of the deceased: the livery stable keeper, who provided the hearse and funeral carriage; the carpenter or cabinetmaker, who made the coffins; and the sexton, who was generally in charge of bell-tolling and gravedigging. They "undertook" to do the job no one else wanted.

When an undertaker was called out of town in the evening, he knew that he wouldn't get back in time for breakfast. He sat perched up on the top of the old horse-drawn "dead-wagon" and did his best to keep from going to sleep and falling off.

The first Lodi area undertaker on record was Andrew Thomas "A.T." Rutledge. He was born August 22, 1830 to Thomas E. and Atelia (Peery) Rutledge in Montgomery County, Virginia. He was reared in his native county and state until the age of twelve and received a common school education. He then accompanied his parents to Wayne County, Missouri; from there, when he was seventeen years old, the family went to Montgomery County, Indiana. In Darlington, Montgomery County, Indiana, he learned his trade of wheelwright by serving an apprenticeship of three years. Mr. Rutledge married Catherine R. Gordon, a native of Indiana. In 1852, at the age of twenty-two, he drove an ox team across the plains from Indiana, his destination being Hangtown (now Placerville), and for two years he had considerable experience in placer mining in El Dorado County.

Mr. Rutledge settled in 1854 in Woodbridge where he began farming. In 1857, being very proficient with tools and woodwork, Mr. Rutledge started the pioneer wheelwright business in that town. He combined that with the undertaking business because he was frequently called upon to make coffins in which to bury the dead.

These coffins were made of boards, covered with velvet outside and lined with muslin inside. In 1862, he went to San Francisco and while there, bought the first lot of varnished coffins to be used in Woodbridge. These coffins were brought to Woodbridge up the Mokelumne River on the steamer "Pert."



Andrew and Catherine Rutledge ▲
PHOTO RALPH LEA

On a side note, a person would be slow to believe that the Mokelumne River could have ever been navigated by a steamship, but such was the case. The "Pert" made trips as far up as Lockeford. The boat was finally stranded at a place called Staples Ferry, about opposite where Harmony Grove Church now stands. The steamer was abandoned, the machinery and other valuable portions being first removed.

In 1869, having recently obtained a second-hand hearse, Mr. Rutledge moved his family and businesses to Sacramento Street in Lodi. A.T. Rutledge and George W. Hill, a jeweler, were practically the only businessmen in Lodi who did not patronize the saloons, of which there were thirteen. The prediction was freely made that businessmen who did not patronize the saloons could not live in Lodi, but Mr. Rutledge and Mr. Hill did live and prosper. Mr. Rutledge was honest in his dealings and ever a friend to the needy.

In Thompson & West's "History of San Joaquin County" four physicians and two undertakers are listed for the Lodi area in 1879, however, they are not named.

In 1885, Mr. Rutledge retired from the wheelwright enterprise and devoted his attention principally to undertaking. From 1885 to 1897, he managed the Simpson Lumber Company on Oak Street, near Main Street, conducting this along with his other affairs. Mr. Rutledge was a member of the Presbyterian Church in Woodbridge and an attendant of the Congregational Church in Lodi, singing in the latter church's choir. He served as a trustee of the Salem School District Board. He also affiliated with the Lodi Lodge No. 259, I.O.O.F., having joined that lodge a few days after its organization, which was effected in Lodi on May 22, 1877.

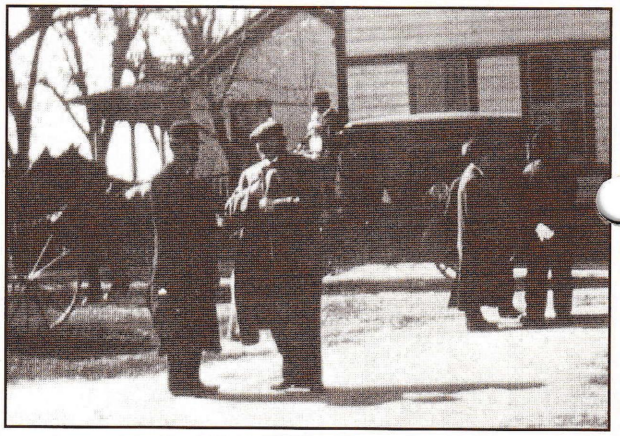
Mr. Rutledge and his wife, Catherine, had two daughters, Fannie and Mary. Mary's husband, Albert J. Larson, briefly worked in the undertaking business with his father-in-law in 1893. However, after a short time, Mr. Larson moved on to real estate, then settled in the lumber business. He took over management of Simpson Lumber Company after his father-in-law retired from that business.

The San Joaquin County directory listed five undertakers for the entire county, A.T. Rutledge was the only one serving the Lodi area through the 1890's.

Frank O. Hale came to Lodi around 1895, working as an orchardist. His wife's name was Elizabeth or "Lizzie." By 1900, he had taken up undertaking, operating out of his home at the southwest corner of Church and Oak streets. A number of years later, Mr. Hale was quoted in the newspaper as saying, "Doctors have many places to send patients to die when they cannot cure them!"

Change came to the local undertaking business in 1902. The two Lodi undertakers were offering a "new" service: embalming. If embalming preserved a case for as much as ten days, it was next door to being a miracle. Originated in ancient Egypt, the practice of embalming declined until the 1600's, when it was used in order to preserve medical specimens. During the Civil War, embalming was used to preserve bodies of the war dead for shipment home. Families now looked to the undertaker to ensure that all the funeral formalities were correct, the undertaker's role was expanding.

In late 1904, Mr. Hale moved his undertaking business to 18 West Pine Street, between Sacramento and School streets, a site he had purchased. Several years later, the Lodi Home Bakery was next door, owned by Jacob Gatzert and Joe Bartke. Jacob's son, Cliff Gatzert, wrote that when the funeral parlor had a "person," his dad made one less loaf of bread the next day.



▲ *David Kettelman's funeral on February 23, 1911 at his home. Note the horse-drawn hearse in rear.* PHOTO JEANNIE KETTELMAN

In 1907, Frank O. Hale was a City Trustee in addition to his undertaking business. In August 1907, Mr. Rutledge sold his undertaking business to Thomas Leslie Bawden. After having charge of over 1,700 funerals, Andrew Thomas Rutledge died on November 7, 1907, he was seventy-seven years old.

Thomas Leslie Bawden was born in Plymouth, Amador County, California in 1884. He trained to be an undertaker in Sacramento and married twenty-two year old Susan Agnes Jahant in 1907 at her parent's Acampo home. Susan was the daughter of Peter Jahant, a native of France, and Susan (O'Mally) Jahant, a native of Ireland. The Jahants had settled in this area in the 1850's. On September

Hale & Bawden, 11 W. Elm Street
PHOTO RALPH LEA

Susan Bawden

1, 1909, the Lodi Sentinel reported that Mr. and Mrs. Bawden's nine-month old daughter, Marguerite, was declared the prettiest baby by popular vote at the Lodi Motion Picture Theater, the prize was a handsome baby carriage awarded by Henry Lighthouse.

Mr. Bawden, having taken over Mr. Rutledge's business in 1907, left Lodi for a short period in 1908 and engaged in the undertaking business in San Francisco. He returned to Lodi the following year and set up shop in the recently renovated Friedberger building on West Elm Street. Mr. Bawden soon wrote to Oscar H. Wells, who was a funeral director in San Andreas:

Mr. O.H. Wells May 5, 1909

"Dear Sir, I was talking with your brother-in-law, Henry Harney, in regard to whether you would still like to come to Lodi and go into the undertaking business. I have some other business matters that is going to take me away for a short time and I either want to sell my business or take in someone as a partner. I have secured a good location and expect to move in within the next two weeks. I have my headquarters in the Hotel building at present. The proposition is this Mr. Wells, it is a case of get out and rustle, and one man isn't as good as two, and one man can't be in two places at once. There is a good business here and I don't think it will be long until we could get our share of the trade. Mr. Hale had eleven good cases last month, in fact he is busy most all of the time. He isn't a hard man to compete with as he don't know the business any too well and I am sure he can't hold it all. I have a good hearse and dead wagon, a good stock of caskets and robes, in fact I have good equipment. I keep the rigs in one of the stables and can get a team any time. If you would consider this proposal, come down and we will talk it over. I have to go away shortly for a while at least, so I would like to hear from you soon. Hoping to hear from you soon.

I remain yours truly,

T.L. Bawden."

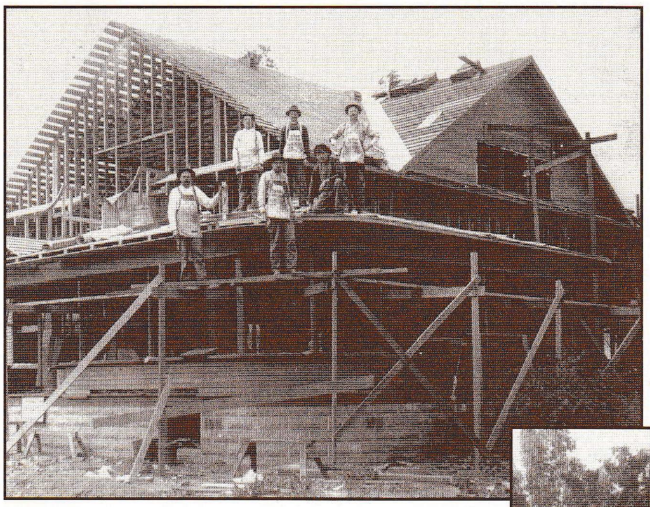
Thomas Bawden
PHOTO RALPH LEA

Mr. Bawden and Oscar H. Wells became partners and formed Bawden & Wells. They leased the Bert Stannard residence at 120 West Pine Street, their plans to fit it up into a combined residence and undertaking parlor were completed in October, 1909. They purchased the first motorized hearse in San Joaquin County.

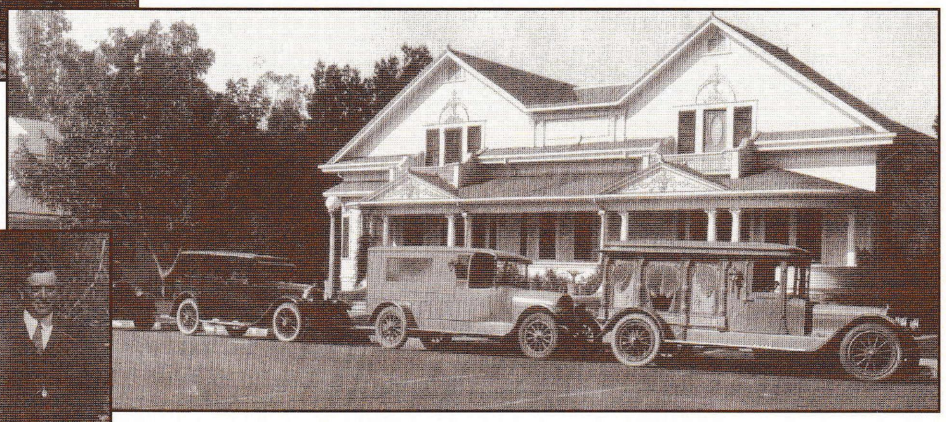
Horses were still being used though. Frank Siegalkoff's father, William, owned the City Livery Stables located at the southeast corner of Main and Pine streets. Frank, in his teens, drove horses pulling the hearse wagon for the funeral home. He had to stuff newspapers into the man-sized black Stetson top hat that he wore, he also wore a long black coat with tails. Both items of clothing are at the Hill House Museum, donated by Mr. Siegalkoff's family.

Meanwhile, Frank O. Hale also took a partner, John W. Scott, and in January 1910 opened Hale & Scott in

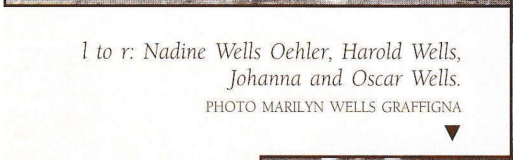
Bawden & Wells, 120 W. Pine St., circa 1909
PHOTO RALPH LEA



Building the Max Elwert home in 1911, future site of Wells Funeral Home. PHOTO MERRY DONAHUE

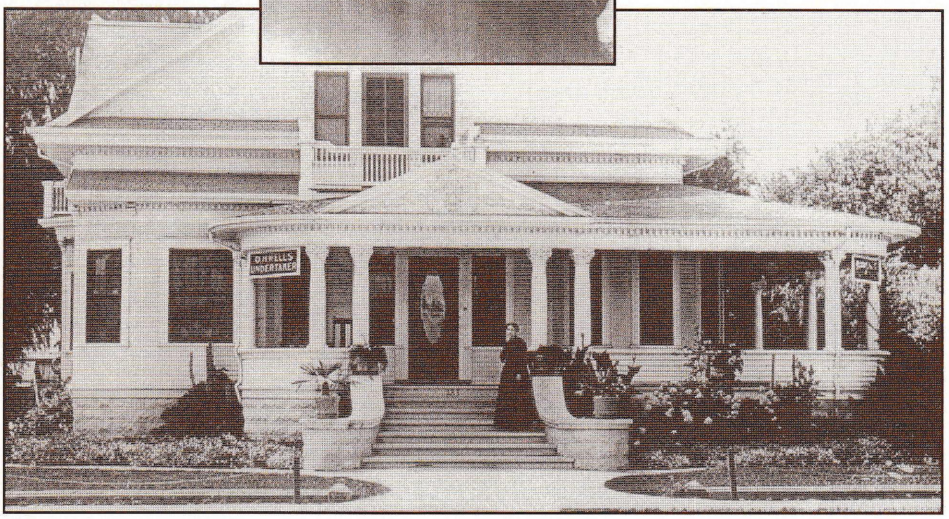


Wells Funeral Home showing off newly expanded business and their fleet of vehicles. PHOTO MERRY DONAHUE



l to r: Nadine Wells Oehler, Harold Wells, Johanna and Oscar Wells. PHOTO MARILYN WELLS GRAFFIGNA

Former home of Max Elwert turned into a funeral parlor by Oscar Wells, circa 1913. PHOTO RALPH LEA



Oscar H. Wells' father operated the old hotel at Fourth Crossing, then a stage stop between San Andreas and Angel's Camp in Calaveras County. Oscar himself operated the Wells Fargo agency in addition to his undertaking business while in San Andreas. Oscar married Johanna Harney in 1898, she was the daughter of John S. and Marie Caroline Harney, a pioneer San Joaquin County family. During her lifetime, Johanna or "Hanna" Wells received her license to become one of the first women embalmers in California. In 1910, friends of Mr. Wells urged him to stand as a candidate for the nomination for the office of Constable of Lodi. He did not become Constable, but continued to concentrate on his undertaking business. By 1912, Mr. Wells was in business alone, Mr. Bawden had returned to San Francisco for a second time.

When Nellie Hill died on January 30, 1912, her female classmates carried her casket almost one block from the Hill home, then located at 115 South School Street, to the Methodist Church, then located at the northwest corner of School and Oak streets.

A number of moves occurred in 1913. In January, Mr. Wells purchased the former home of Max Elwert at 123 North School Street. Mr. Elwert used to say, "Wash yourself and I will clothe you," he owned the Enterprise Clothing Store. Mr. Elwert had died the previous year and Mr. Wells was in charge of the service, which was held in the Elwert home. Mr. Wells was impressed with the layout of the

Hale's newly remodeled establishment at 18 and 20 West Pine Street. The newspaper stated, "People of this city have long felt the want of a first-class funeral chapel. This is the neatest and best equipped funeral parlor to be found in the county. The adjoining building to the parlor, formerly occupied by the Lodi Home Bakery, has been converted to a beautiful chapel. The 20' x 40' building has been furnished in a rich green shade, expensive axminster carpet, and leather upholstered furniture. No expense has been spared. Seating capacity is 125. There is a large supply of funeral robes and a new black funeral car, also, the existing grey car is available if the casket is grey or white. Beautiful horses match the cars."

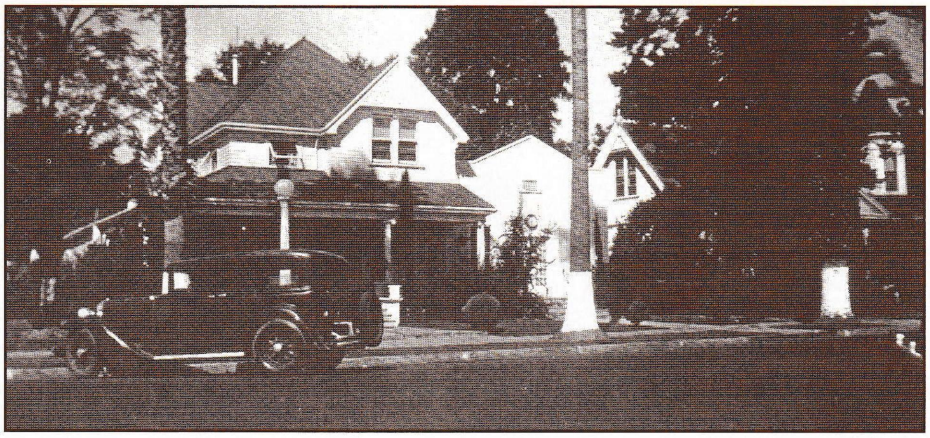
home and told the widow that the home was certainly most adapted to such a solemn occasion. When Mr. Wells and his family moved in, they lived upstairs and the downstairs was converted to his undertaking business.

It was announced in February 1913 that John W. Scott had severed his connection with Mr. Hale. In March, Mr. Scott left for San Jose where he planned to live and work for the Woodrow Undertaking Company, of which he had purchased an interest in.

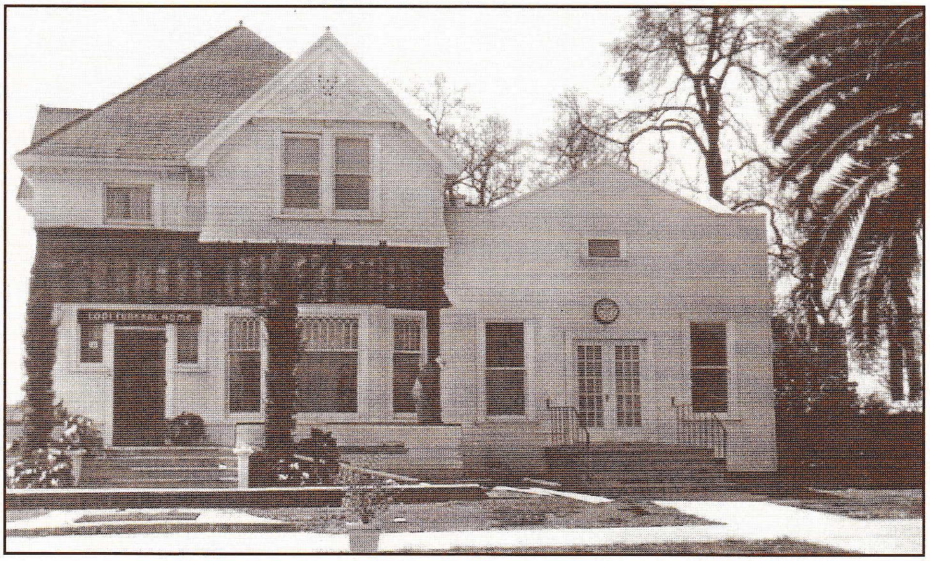
Mr. Bawden returned to Lodi from San Francisco in July 1913 and purchased half of Mr. Hale's undertaking establishment. The Lodi Sentinel commented that, "the addition of this wide awake and thoroughly competent undertaker and funeral director will add considerable strength to the firm. In fact, the business of this establishment has grown so large that at times it was almost impossible for one man to give each case all the attention that the firm desired."

Mr. and Mrs. Bawden purchased the residence at 11 West Elm Street in 1914 from Albert J. Larson, Mr. Rutledge's son-in-law. By the following year, Hale & Bawden relocated into the converted downstairs quarters, Mr. and Mrs. Bawden lived upstairs. They later bought a second related business, the Lodi Cemetery on East Pine Street. Mr. Hale left the partnership, but remained active as a City Trustee until his retirement in 1928. By 1923, Mr. Bawden had also left the partnership, he and Susan divorced. Mr. Bawden stayed in the undertaking business, moving to Reno. He eventually returned to Lodi and worked for his former wife, who still lived above the business, located on Elm Street.

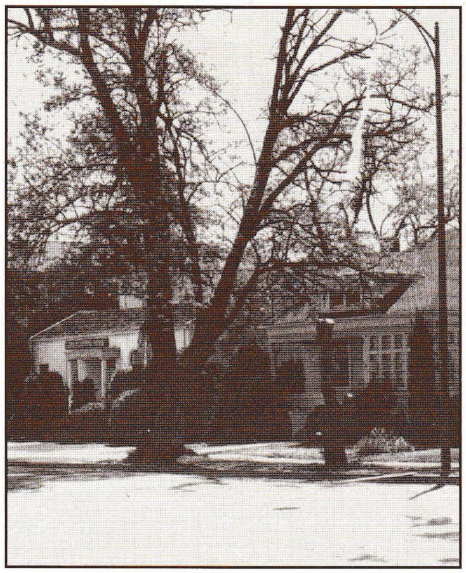
Meanwhile, Mr. Wells enlarged his business. In 1923, he doubled the business space by building to the north, adding a large chapel, an organ loft overlooking the chapel, two vestibules, and several storage rooms. He duplicated the existing exterior on the new addition, adding a "second" front entry. An architect's drawings showed another version for the front of the building that Mr. Wells must have considered. The alternate plan did not have the unique double front entry that was eventually built. His son, Harold J., received his California license that same year and came to work for his father. He had been in the same business as his father since about 1919 and was connected with Halsted & Co. in San Francisco for three years before returning to Lodi. Harold and his wife, Eunice, had two children, Clifford Wells and Marilyn Wells Graffigna. Harold bought his father's business in 1926, Oscar H. Wells was ill, he died in 1929. Frank O. Hale died three years later in November 1932, his 75th birthday was twenty-one days away.



▲ *Samuel Salas opened his new business in the old Frank Beckman home, circa 1932. Note Hill House to the right.* PHOTO LEONARD MESSER



▲ *The Salas Funeral Home, 121 South School Street.* PHOTO LEONARD MESSER



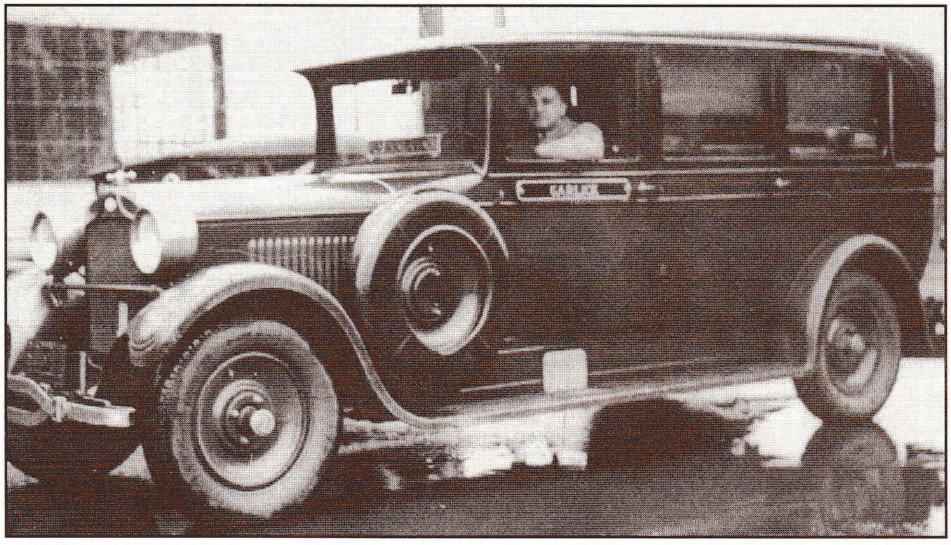
▲ *Salas Funeral Home, 225 South School Street. They lived in home on the right.* PHOTO LEONARD MESSER

▲ *Lodi Funeral Home, 225 South School Street. Samuel and Mildred Salas' home was moved to make way for an addition and new parking lot.*
PHOTO LEONARD MESSER

▲ *The old funeral chapel inside Lodi Funeral Home in 1940, 225 South School Street.*
PHOTO LEONARD MESSER

◀ *Samuel Salas, on right.*
PHOTO LEONARD MESSER

▼ *Samuel Salas behind the wheel of a hearse.* PHOTO LEONARD MESSER



In 1933, O.H. Wells and Son celebrated seventy-five years of business. Harold took out a full-page ad in the Lodi Sentinel detailing the history of the firm, a direct continuation of the little undertaking business begun by Andrew T. Rutledge. The accompanying news article noted that "those who are engaged with Mr. Wells in his work, believe, with him, that the mortuary profession serves in such a manner and at such a time as to offer an opportunity for service and help to one's fellow-beings such as is seldom found in most vocations or at any other time in life. They fully realize, as does their employer, that a mortician's compensation must often largely be simply the joy of having served well. They realize that their work is too closely interwoven with the warp and woof of life to be justly measured by any mercenary standard. The modern funeral director, though, with his extensive technical training and scientific methods, commonly accomplishes more gratifying results that the old-timer ever dared dream of, even in his wildest moments. Recently, Mr. Wells prepared a case that was kept here in Lodi for more than four months before shipping east. Upon arrival there, public funeral services were held and the appearance of the case was perfect."

Samuel D. Salas opened the Lodi Funeral Home at 121 South School Street a year earlier in 1932. He rented the Beckman home at 121 South School Street, living upstairs, his business located downstairs. He purchased the property after several years. In 1939, Samuel Salas moved his business one block south to 225 South School Street. He also moved part of the building from the first site to the second. Mr. Salas and his wife, Mildred, lived next door at 217 South School Street.

On July 1, 1955, Harold J. Wells announced the formation of a partnership with Russell T. Gierhart, who had been with the firm since 1950. Mr. Gierhart was born in Indiana, lived in Chicago and Denver before his family settled in Omaha, Ne-

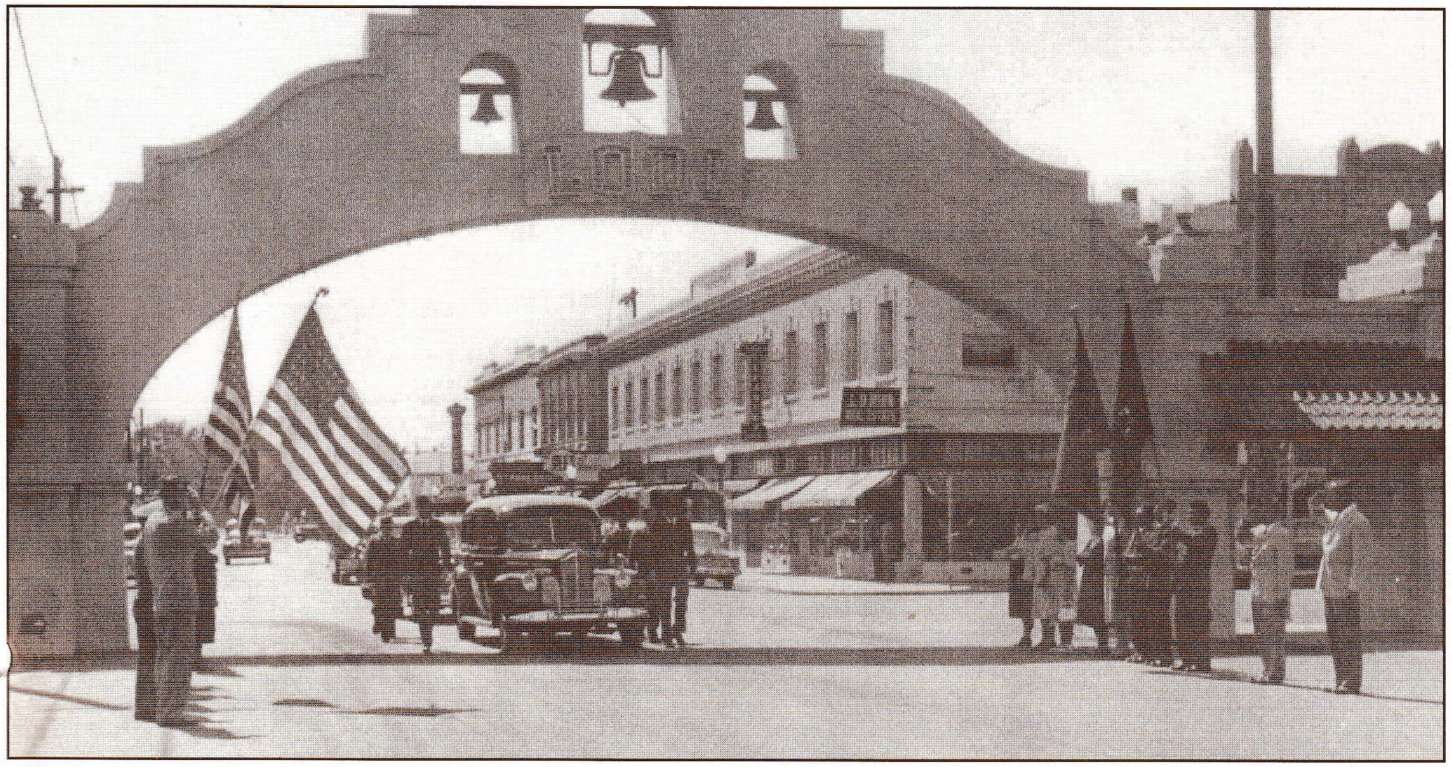
PHOTO LEONARD MESSER

Military funeral leaving Salas Funeral Home, circa 1942; 225 South School Street. First Christian Church to the left. ▲

braska. He graduated from high school and entered the profession in 1932. He served his two years apprenticeship and attended the Williams Institute of Embalming in Kansas City, Kansas, receiving his Nebraska license in 1934. He married Adele Blackstone at David City, Nebraska in 1937. They had two children, Karen and Susan. He came to California in 1940 and received his license here in 1942.

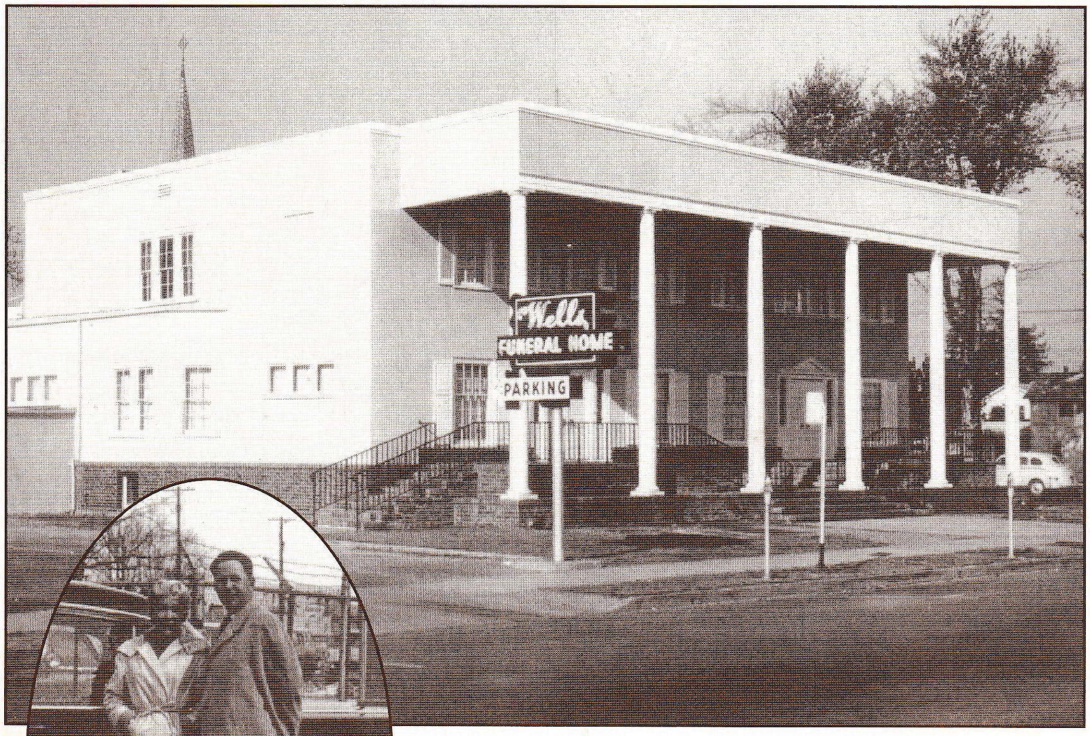
The East Pine Funeral Home, 5750 East Pine Street, opened at the Lodi Cemetery grounds around 1955. Charles Mabrey, funeral director, was there for about ten years. It later became Humphrey's Funeral Home, then Rocha's Mortuary.

In January 1957, a new and beautiful Wells Funeral Home opened after an eight month remodeling program. The complete renovation was commenced with the basic purpose



▲ *Military funeral passing under the Arch, circa 1942.*

PHOTO LEONARD MESSER



▲ *Newly remodeled Wells Funeral Home in 1957. Note St. Peter's Church steeple above roof line.*
PHOTO MERRY DONAHUE

◄ *Russell and Adele Gierhart.*
PHOTO MERRY DONAHUE

of keeping abreast of this community's growth, and in order to better serve its people. The cost was $60,000. Apparently in the works for some time, the plans for the remodeling were drawn in 1948. The distinctive double front entry remained in the new facade.

Eight days after the grand reopening of Wells Funeral Home in 1957, Susan Bawden died at her home at 11 West Elm Street, she had been ill for a short time, she was seventy-one years old. It appeared that she ran her business, Hale & Bawden, almost to the end. Her former husband, Thomas, who had remarried some years earlier, died at his Stockton home on June 13, 1958. He was seventy-four years old.

Lodi Funeral Home moved in 1966 to its present location at 725 South Fairmont Avenue. The former home at 225 South School Street that served as their place of business for twenty-seven years was demolished in 1971, the lot now serves as parking for Lyon's Restaurant. Mr. and Mrs. Salas' former home next door was moved to the 1900 block of South Church Street, where it remains today. Samuel Salas died in 1972. Lodi Funeral Home is now owned by Mr. Salas' two daughters, Patricia Quinn and Betty Rae Hartwick, and his nephew, Leonard Messer, who is the current manager.

Harold J. Wells lived seventy-five years, he died in March 1976. Russell Gierhart died in 1984. The Wells Funeral Home was renamed Gierhart-Wells & Donahue in 1988 when Pat and Merry Donahue purchased the business and is still located at 123 North School Street. In 1980, Rocha's Mortuary moved to 215 South School Street, the site of Samuel and Mildred Salas' home many years earlier.

REFERENCES

"The American Way of Death" by Jessica Mitford

"The High Cost of Dying" by Gregory W. Young

"The Last Great Necessity" by David Charles Sloane

Thompson and West 1879 History of San Joaquin County

Tinkham 1923 History of San Joaquin County

Lodi Sentinel 1907 -1913

Stockton Record 1957-1958, 1976

City of Lodi Records

Lodi Memorial Cemetery Records

The late Cliff Gatzert's writings

Interviews with:
Merry Donahue
Glenn Fry
Marilyn (Wells) Graffigna
Leonard Messer
Marjie (Harney) Poggio
Walter Scheffer

THE LODI HISTORIAN
is a quarterly publication of the Lodi Historical Society
P.O. Box 264, Lodi, CA 95241-0264

**Ralph Lea ..... Editor*
**Lucy Reller ..... Assistant Editor*

LODI HISTORICAL SOCIETY
1998 Board of Directors

**Janice Roth ..... President*
Leonard Messer ..... 1st Vice President
Lynn Benbrook ..... 2nd Vice President
**Nancy Schmer ..... Recording Secretary*
**Evelyn Hassbaum ..... Corresponding Secretary*
Joseph Wood ..... Treasurer

**Susanne Benbrook* **Ralph Lea*
**Bing Taylor* **Hugh Metcalf*
Bill Brown **Gladys Mettler*
**Vesta Mason* **Walter Scott*
**Violet Stenson*

HISTORY COMMITTEE
Ralph Lea, Chairman
Ellen Edwards, Lucy Reller, Jean Kettleman, Helen Crittenden, Maxine Kelley

**History Committee Member*
All rights to republication are reserved
Permission to quote or use material herein should be obtained in writing